In common parlance, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) has often been spoken of as though it were represented in a single, unified entity, when in fact there are multiple separate entities that have claimed the title of the SSNP in Syria and Lebanon both during the time of the Syrian civil war and following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Existing external reports and social media pages bearing the name of the SSNP add to the confusion and often get the facts wrong. In light of a recent query I received regarding SSNP factions and the muddled information one finds on many platforms, it is worth clarifying the different SSNPs and assessing the big picture:

(i) One SSNP is currently headed by Ali Haydar, who served for a period as minister of 'reconciliation' under the Assad regime in the period 2012-2018, with the ministry then converted into a 'commission' and fully dissolved in 2020. This group is also called the 'Intifada' faction. Haydar is now based in Lebanon. His SSNP did not join the Baath Party-led 'National Progressive Front' (NPF) in the Syrian parliament. It is only this SSNP that can be thought of as having been any sort of 'loyalist opposition' within the framework of the Assad regime. For example, in late 2015, a leading member of Haydar's SSNP- Abd al-Qadir Ubayd- wrote an extended letter to the then Syrian regime-aligned newspaper al-Watan, clarifying at the time that his party was functioning as an "opposition party within a national unity government," referring to the fact that this SSNP won some seats in the 2012 Syrian parliament elections but outside the framework of the NPF. While calling for support for the Syrian army in "waging war on and confronting the terrorist takfiri forces of darkness," he also stressed the need for "fundamental and comprehensive change to the structure of the political system in al-Sham- the 'Syrian Arab Republic.'"

(ii) An SSNP with headquarters in Lebanon and headed by Lebanese politician Asaad Hardan. It is this SSNP that came to wider media prominence in the earlier years of the war in Syria because of the mobilisation of its own 'Eagles of the Whirlwind' militia (which contained both Lebanese and Syrian personnel in its ranks) to serve as an auxiliary force for the Syrian army, fighting on multiple battlefronts against the wider insurgency and the Islamic State. It won seats in the Syrian parliament in 2016 under the NPF. Hardan was succeeded by Ali Qanso as leader of this SSNP in August 2016. Then the following successions took place: Hanna al-Nashif (elected November 2017), Faris Saad (July 2019-May 2020). The large number of successive leaders in a short time span suggested to observers that there was an internal crisis of control over the leadership within the party. Wa'il al-Husniya managed the party for a transition period before Rabi' Banat was elected leader in October 2020.

However, Hardan refused to accept Banat's election, triggering a split within the party whereby al-Husniya continued to lead a faction loyal to Hardan before Hardan was formally elected leader of his own faction in November 2021. The split that has emerged essentially boils down to Hardan's wish to maintain leadership over the party, and it continues today in Lebanon, with Hardan re-elected by his own faction at the end of last month, while Banat was re-elected head

of his own faction in August 2025.

The split also had ramifications in Syria, with some siding with Hardan and others supporting Banat. According to one individual from the Hardan faction in Syria who says he also had good relations with the Banat faction, some 65% of the members in Syria sided with the Hardan faction, which remained the SSNP group represented in the Syrian parliament's NPF until the fall of the Assad regime. However, the main body of the 'Eagles of the Whirlwind' militia remained with Rabi' Banat. As such, the visibility of the 'Eagles of the Whirlwind' in Syria decreased. While some propaganda of the Hardan faction suggests the group maintained an armed contingent inside Syria, it also appears the group wanted to emphasise integration of members into the regular Syrian armed forces.

An event described as being held by 'Eagles of the Whirlwind' (Hardan-SSNP) in Aleppo in November 2021, commemorating the founding of the SSNP.

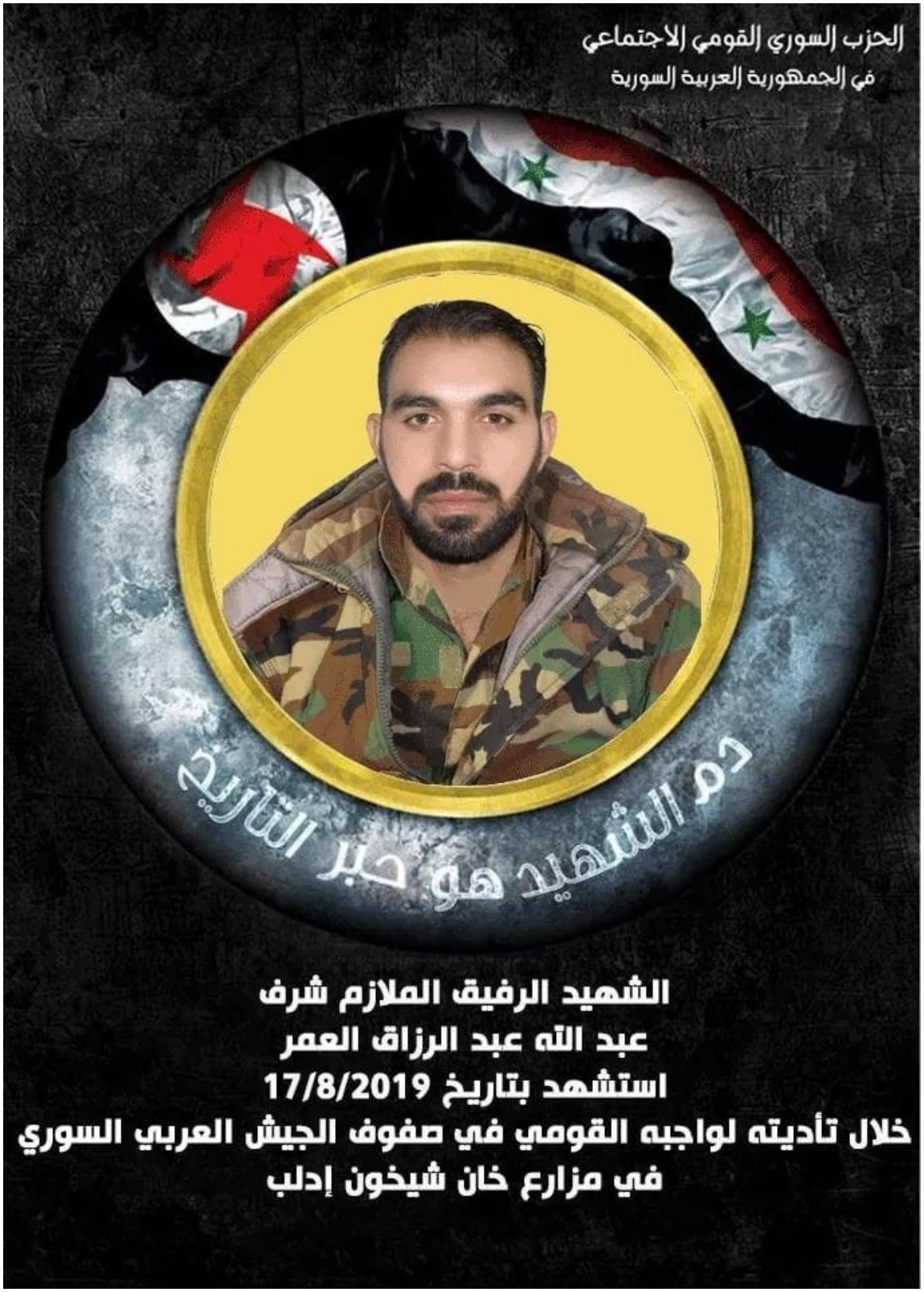
A member of the Hardan faction whose death was announced on 4 December 2024 (i.e. during the final insurgent offensives that brought down the Assad regime). According to the

announcement, he was killed fighting in Hama countryside and had been a member of the Syrian army since 2016.

The ‘Eagles of the Whirlwind’ under Banat’s faction participated in the Hezbollah-led front against Israel in the period 2023-2024. In addition, this year the group has claimed at least four fighters killed in Israeli strikes on Lebanon. At the present time, the Banat-led SSNP is holding dialogue with Ali Haydar and his SSNP.

Ali Haydar Zanit, an 'Eagles of the Whirlwind' (Banat-SSNP) fighter killed in Israeli strikes in Lebanon in February 2025.

(iii) An SSNP that called itself the “SSNP in the Syrian Arab Republic” and was initially headed by Isam al-Muhayiri: effectively a 2012 break-off from the Hardan-led SSNP. In February 2016 al-Muhayiri was succeeded by Joseph Suwayd, who was in turn succeeded by Elias Shahin in November 2018. As its name suggests, this SSNP party was only active inside Syria, with members enlisting in the Syrian army and auxiliary formations. This SSNP was effectively banned by the regime in October 2019 following a court order for the dissolution of the party. Some observers link this move against this SSNP with the broader crackdown the Assad regime launched against businessman Rami Makhlouf, who financed this SSNP faction and maintained a broader militia network through his al-Bustan Association. Despite backing from Makhlouf, however, this SSNP never matched the Hardan-led SSNP for influence within Assad’s Syria. Following the court order for dissolution, the “SSNP in the Syrian Arab Republic” ceased to operate.



A member of the SSNP party led by Muhayiri and his successors who was killed fighting for the Syrian army in the Khan Shaykhun area of Idlib, August 2019.

In the bigger picture, what do these various SSNPs tell us about the SSNP brand and its ideology? For a time, particularly with the growing media prominence of the Hardan-led SSNP during the earlier years of the Syrian civil war and the fascination with the 'Eagles of the Whirlwind', there was some speculation about the possibility of the SSNP being a competitor to the Baath Party within Assad-held Syria, and that the SSNP's ideological notion of 'Greater Syria' was potentially on the way to a serious revival. In truth, this speculation greatly exaggerated the influence of the Hardan group and also misunderstood the nature of its practical function (and the function of the other SSNP factions) within the framework of the Assad regime. In a 1989 study on the SSNP and its history, Daniel Pipes noted at the time that the SSNP had essentially evolved into becoming an "instrument" of Syria's Baath Party. In a concluding paragraph, he noted:

"But the long-term implications of alliance with Syria appeared ominous for the SSNP; [Hafez al-]Asad's support had a steep price. He sought to bring the party under Damascus's control and make it a shell for Syrian agents and an instrument of Syrian policy. The potential danger is clear; by agreeing to work so closely with Syria's rulers, the party forfeited the strength that had made it an important force over the decades-its visionary politics and fierce independence. Asad's success in dictating terms restricted the SSNP's capacity for autonomous action. If money and arms from Damascus allowed the SSNP to flourish temporarily, absorption by a police state rendered its future bleak. Alliance with Damascus contained the likely seeds of the SSNP's demise."

Much of this same analysis could be applied to the various SSNP groups and what their practical function was in the war. True, the secular and non-sectarian nature of SSNP ideology (with the exception of its anti-Semitism) proved attractive to some members of Syria's minority communities as an alternative to Baathist emphasis on pan-Arabism, but in return for being allowed some space to engage in limited local outreach, the SSNP groups were all expected to accept and promote the hegemony of the Assad dynasty and the Baath Party in Syria: an expectation that the SSNP factions readily complied with.

Whether in making declarations of support for Assad's position as president, holding joint events with the Baath Party, mobilising fighters to serve either in the regular Syrian armed forces or auxiliary militias, or promoting notions of 'reconciliation' (which, whatever local nuances one might have observed, effectively meant rebel-held areas surrendering to Assad's authority), the various SSNP factions practically served, like other non-Baath parties accepted within Assad's Syria, as 'satellites' mobilising support for the maintenance of the Assad and Baath-led system. They also helped confer that system an image of 'pluralistic' and 'democratic' legitimacy- a concept the regime eagerly promoted in its educational system, for example. The SSNP factions were never intended to function as alternative centres of power to seriously challenge or rival the Baath. Indeed, they could not realistically have expected to achieve such an aim.

Ultimately, the broader alliance the SSNP factions made with the Assad regime has proved their undoing. Along with the Baath Party, the SSNP brand is now heavily tarnished in Syria for association with the prior regime, and the various factions now find themselves effectively

banned from Syria's new political order on account of the new government's dissolution of the NPF. In Lebanon, the SSNP is now in disarray through internal divisions and is also tarnished along with other allies of Hezbollah for having brought a disastrous war upon Lebanon by opening a 'support front' for Gaza against Israel.

By way of an appendix, below is an interview I conducted recently with a person from Latakia (and still residing in Syria) who was part of the "SSNP in the Syrian Arab Republic" faction, looking at the role of SSNP factions in the Syrian civil war and the future of the SSNP brand and ideology after Assad's fall. The interview is slightly edited and condensed for clarity. I think some of the things the interviewee says are retroactive spin, but it is the case that there are still some adherents of SSNP ideology in Syria. Yet it seems doubtful they can somehow build a new SSNP that would win mass appeal.

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Q: What were the main organisations that bore the party's name?

A: There were three organisations: one called Intifada headed by Ali Haydar (and still is headed by him). It was the smallest of the groups in terms of number of members.

Another organisation was in the NPF with its main headquarters in Lebanon, headed by Asaad Hardan.

The third was based in Damascus and headed by Issam al-Muhayiri. It was licensed in accordance with the party laws but not present in the NPF. After quarrels with the prior authorities, the prior president [Assad] issued a decree to dissolve it and cancel its license in 2019.

Q: Some say the party in the NPF was a mere tool for the Baath Party in that it supported the Baath Party's rule in Syria while its orientation and that of the Baath became the same. Is this correct in your view?

A: Of course not correct. This organisation did not enter the NPF and was not allowed to operate and open offices until 2006. In that year, most of its members rejected entering the NPF and a counter movement arose with its members subjected to harassment by the security services. In my view the party's nationalist leadership thought that by entering the NPF, we would be allowed to operate and conduct activities to spread nationalist awareness among the citizens. They were loyal to the state and not the Baath Party whose principles fundamentally differ from the SSNP, which, even after entering the NPF, was subjected to harassment. But there were some Lebanese party leaders connected with the Syrian security apparatuses who tried to distort the SSNP from its path, doing so with the support of the prior authorities, on the pretext that they were fighting for Palestine, the resistance axis and other such pretences.

Q: When the demonstrations broke out in Syria, what were the SSNP organisations' positions on what was happening? Of course the party affiliated with the NPF brought in the 'Eagles of the

Whirlwind' from Lebanon. Can you clarify how the positions of the party's organisations on the events developed?

A: First, all the social nationalists in Syria considered themselves opposition and thought that the job of the Syrian army was to fight Israel and protect the borders, and that the security forces' job was to protect people, and that the president needed to undertake reforms. In particular, all the SSNP organisations years before the demonstrations demanded three things and referred memorandums to the state regarding that: we were striving in our cultural and political clubs for the following (i) cancellation of article 8 of the constitution,* (ii) announcement of a law for parties and a law for free media, and (iii) announcement of a law for election and transition of authority. However, the nationalists were against chaos and sabotage, against the use of religion in politics, against the use of arms, against the sectarian spirit that had begun to rise, and against the intervention of foreign powers that kindled the strife. After thousands of Arab and non-Arab foreign fighters began to enter for the purpose of supporting the religion and Islam, and after clear sectarian slogans began appearing, innocent Alawites and Christians who were guilty of no crime began to be killed, and arms began to be borne, the party leadership in Lebanon began forming Eagles of the Whirlwind in particular to fight Daesh [Islamic State] and takfiri extremists. At this point, the nationalists became divided between those who blessed this step and those opposed to it. But in general the so-called party's ranks and the nationalist leaders deemed both sides criminal and considered the conflict to be one between a repressive dictatorial authority and takfiri Islamic fundamentalists, which would only bring Syrians to ruin and torment. Most of the nationalists broke off from their organisations and stayed in their homes.

Q: Could it be said that the party led by Hardan became the largest SSNP group in Syria during the war? And for what reasons?

A: Yes, because after the step was taken to establish Eagles of the Whirlwind, his party enjoyed support at the time from the so-called resistance axis, and the most active areas at that time were Aleppo, Idlib and Homs.

Q: Did Eagles of the Whirlwind receive support and training from Hezbollah and the IRGC?

A: I don't have precise information on this matter.

Q: Okay. And approximately how many 'martyrs' did the Eagles have in the battles?

A: I don't know in truth because I wasn't in Hardan's group and I did not have direct knowledge of the military situation, but it became clear to us nationalists later that the Eagles of the Whirlwind engaged in exaggeration whether in terms of their numbers or role, and most of their fighters were not nationalists.

Q: In 2017 Hardan's party got six or seven seats in the People's Assembly [Syrian parliament], but by 2024 it only got three seats. What were the reasons for the decline in the SSNP's

influence? Can you also clarify the dispute that arose between Hardan and Rabi‘ Banat and the positions of the nationalists in Syria on the matter?

A: In 2016, Hardan’s party did not get seven seats. The party that got the seats was the licensed party led by Isam al-Muhayiri based in Damascus.** This was one of the reasons that led to the authority’s resentment of the party at the time and led to its dissolution later on. I was in the licensed group based in Damascus: since the party’s dissolution in 2019, I kept to my home and work without doing any party work. And now we wait.

The problem in Syria is that there is no true democracy, and so the number of members of the party in the People’s Assembly doesn’t reflect its strength or weakness. When the party won seven seats, it won through its popular force outside the NPF. As for in 2024, the party that won three seats was the party in the NPF, because this was the set number of seats for it.

The dispute between the two groups based in Lebanon is in my view nothing more than a conflict over positions of leadership. Thus, the nationalists today who are outside the two groups are many times larger in number than those present in the two groups, and they will not return unless the two groups unite.

Q: But is it true that the Eagles of the Whirlwind’s work in Syria ended after the dispute that arose between Hardan and Rabi‘ Banat?

A: I think before that, because the nationalists disassociated from it, and as is the case with all irregular military groups: when it loses its spirit and pries about for the end goal, it doesn’t find that goal, and it may see itself as being exploited for ends that are not its goals, and thus it declines and comes to an end. This is my analysis. I don’t have precise information about the matter.

Q: Now all the SSNP groups are banned in Syria?

A: Today all parties are banned, even the Muslim Brotherhood. In truth, we hope that a new party law will be issued and that parties of all ideas and currents will be formed, with high-level cultural and ideological competition, so that we can finally know what Syrians want. Do they want a pluralistic, civil democratic state, or do they want a religious state? If there are no parties and currents freely competing, we won’t be able to build a state of citizenship in which all Syrians are equal in rights, interests and fulfilment of obligations. The SSNP includes people of all religions, sects and ethnicities: none of them accept partitioning Syria or other external projects. We are for building a state of citizenship. Otherwise, the situation will be very bleak.

Q: In your personal view, would it have been better for Assad to resign in 2011?

A: Of course. At least this would have kept Syria and the Syrian people away from the woes, destruction and ruin they went through. The forces that wanted Syria destroyed would not have been able to realise their aims, and you would not have had a generation in Idlib and Turkey’s

camps raised over 14 years on the notion that all who disagree with them in religious belief are disbelievers who should be killed. Nor would have religious extremism become as it is now.

Q: Do you think the SSNP can rise again in Syria? For example Syrians may ask now: why should we support the party that is divided into different groups while Hardan's group stood by Assad and supported a military group for that purpose? Why should we support the party when it stood by the 'resistance axis' that supported Assad? What can the party offer to the Syrian people today? And what are the most important mistakes over the course of the war that the party must learn from to secure its future in Syria?

A: First, the SSNP will not die: the woes, killing, displacement and imprisonment it went through would be sufficient to wipe out any other party from existence. The party was persecuted and its members killed and imprisoned in the days of the French occupation. The party was also persecuted, dissolved and its members killed and imprisoned in 1949 during the nationalist uprising in Lebanon. The party was also persecuted with its members killed, imprisoned and displaced during 1956 and the days of the Baath revolution in 1963, and after the rise of the Corrective Movement [1970]. This only made the parter stronger and more steadfast.

Second, the party, based on its principles, has always espoused the unity of the Syrian nation, the unity of Syrian society and the struggle for the Palestinian cause. This is what led one of the party's wings to stand with the state and not with the Baath or Assad.

Today, and in truth this is what every nationalist believes, especially after what we saw and what has made us more certain in our faith…in order to fulfil our duty to the Syrian people in the entire Syrian Fertile Crescent, there will be no deliverance from their crises and the illnesses they are suffering from, except by adopting and supporting the SSNP's principles. For in them is deliverance, and in them is unity, and in them is force, and in them are growth, development and prosperity.

Yes, the party has made mistakes, the most important being surrendering its independent decision-making that arises from its creed and principles. This experience should not be repeated under any pretext. For we are a party of the people and a party of the nation. We are the defenders of its dignity and unity. Yes, some of the party's leaders handed over control to others on the pretext that there is one captain for the ship of resistance and all must follow and support him. This was a fatal mistake.

Notes

***-** Article 8 of the 1973 Syrian constitution, which stipulated the leading role of the Baath party in the state and society.

**- Inaccurate, as noted in the overview of the SSNP factions.